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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

JFK and Vietnam: The Record

Among the tidal wave of material that flooded the media on this 25th memorial of the murder of President John F. Kennedy, it is absolutely appalling to read this work on "Kennedy and the Revision of History" by Philip Geyelin [op-ed, Nov. 29]. He writes trivia and then says "somehow nothing seemed to be settled." He adds that the historical significance of the Kennedy presidency "is still not understood." Why does he exploit trivia to make his point? Why does he avoid the record available? In passing he talks of "the Bay of Pigs fiasco" and says "what Kennedy would have done about Vietnam is unknowable."

President Kennedy realized he had been seriously ill-informed and misled before and during the Bay of Pigs operation. That was April 18-19, 1961. On June 28, 1961, barely two months later, President Kennedy signed and sent National Security Action Memorandum #55 directly to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, saying, among other things of great importance:

"I wish to inform the Joint Chiefs of Staff as follows with regard to my views of their relations to me in Cold War Operations [e.g., clandestine activities]. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have a responsibility for the defense of the nation in the Cold War similar to that which they have in conventional hostilities."

In other words, the JCS, who are by law predominantly in charge during a declared war, were being directed by the president to be responsible for similar activities during the Cold War.

This action alone set in motion administrative machinery that would guard against another Bay of Pigs and significantly reduce the "rogue elephant" role of the CIA.

With respect to Indochina and military activities that had ensued there since the time of presidents Truman and Eisenhower, President Kennedy had made up his mind about the way to go. To set this up he sent the secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and the chairman of the JCS, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, to Vietnam. They returned with a report (written in Washington under close White House scrutiny), which they gave to President Kennedy on Oct. 2, 1963. Its main thrust had been designed to completely change the course of the war and to get all U.S. personnel out of Vietnam by the end of 1965.

The president used material from that report to create the National Security Action Memorandum #263, which decreed "the implementation of plans to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963." The rest is on the record.

These excerpts of the true record are not the frothy "witty, wicked, wise and ill-advised" amalgam that Philip Geyelin, Richard Cohen et al. have tossed our way during this memorial period. John Kennedy was a president of substance. His work is on the record, and it behooves all of us who were close to the activities of his 1,000-day administration to keep the record straight, and the would-be revisionists at bay.

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